

San Francisco Chronicle

Federal water bill plans for the past, ignores the future

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The drought that has gripped California and other parts of the American West should have us rethinking the water policies of the last century in order to prepare for the climatic changes of the next. Yet water legislation now being marked up in the House Resources Committee would take federal water policy back a hundred years - when it rained more and demands on water supplies were less.



Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle
Shasta Lake is currently at all time low levels in this the fourth year of a drought throughout California, as seen on Tues. April 28, 2015, in Shasta, Calif.

The bill, which its author, Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford (Kings County), describes as an effort to modernize water policies, borrows from the old playbook of pitting farms against fish, and seeks to prioritize for a few use of a resource upon which our entire state relies. "Congress cannot make it rain but we can enact policies that expand our water infrastructure, allow for more water conveyance, and utilize legitimate science to ensure a reliable water supply for farmers and families," he wrote when the bill was introduced June 25.

It is a disappointing, indeed cynical, piece of legislation drafted without public hearing. The contrast with the "crowdsourced" bill, made public weeks before it was introduced Wednesday by Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, is stunning. Huffman's bill represents new thinking in water science and water-use technologies in the broadest sense. It offers concepts for a more demanding and drier future, such as reducing water lost to evaporation by covering irrigation canals with solar panels, and investing in water recycling.

No one can deny that Central Valley communities are struggling. We all are - and the really tough choices for us lie ahead - but we cannot sacrifice the environment in an attempt to conduct business as usual. Valadao's bill would roll back the environmental protections "hindering water delivery" and sweep away efforts to restore the salmon fishery called for in the San Joaquin River Restoration Act — an agreement passed unanimously in 2009. To sell this bill as "legitimate science" casts doubts on other dubious projects, like the delta tunnels. Congress must reject this bullying tactic to grab more water for Central Valley agribusiness.

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